

A Wedding to **Die For**

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Chapter One



The large poinsettia on the dining table ruined her view entirely. And that would never do. After all, that was why she booked this cabin. What could be more romantic than a December wedding in the Georgia mountains? Grace Caldwell scanned the great room for a more suitable place to put the plant.

Maybe the fireplace? The hearth held a stack of wood on one end and an old coal bucket with throws piled inside on the other. She shook her head and walked into the bedroom.

Angry voices reached her from outside. She put the plant down and edged closer to the window. A man and a woman. The man's voice was low. She only caught the occasional word or phrase. Maybe "calm down"?

The woman was easy to hear. "Don't tell me to calm down."

Another mumble from the man.

"You created this problem. You solve it."

"I'll ..."

What was that last thing he said?

"I don't care what you do." The woman again, her tone menacing. "Either you take care of her, or I will."

The fine hairs on Grace's arms stood up. She slid to the side of the window and peeked around the blinds. The back of a man in

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jeans and a heavy jacket rounded the corner of the cabin out of sight. What sounded like a UTV engine roared into life.

Grace hurried into the great room. The only window facing the road was over the kitchen sink. By the time she reached it, the vehicle was two cabins away. “Boogers.” She turned and leaned against the counter. “I should have moved quicker.”

It wasn’t that she was nosy—not really. But she wrote suspense books for a living. In a way, she was paid to be nosy.

She selected another pod for the coffee machine. While it brewed, she opened her computer and jotted down the conversation she’d heard. Grace flipped the screen shut and retrieved her coffee. “I don’t know why I’m doing this. Or why I even brought this thing.”

Tomorrow was her wedding day. She certainly had no business pursuing a strange conversation or working on her latest novel, but old habits die hard. Her open notebook sat on the table next to her computer, and she groaned as she glanced at her to-do list. There was no way she could check off all those things before tomorrow. A knock on the door startled her.

Had one of the people from earlier realized Grace heard them arguing? She scanned the room for a weapon. At home, she kept a baseball bat near her bed, but here, there wasn’t even a fire poker.

“Mom? Are you decent? Can I come in?”

Grace rose to greet her daughter, Elizabeth Johnson.

“You look a little pale.” Liz wrinkled her brow. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Grace closed and locked the door. “Did you see a UTV on your way here? With two people in it?”

“No.” Liz narrowed her eyes at her. “Why?”

“It’s not important.” Grace waved a hand in the air. She knew her daughter, and if she told her what happened, Elizabeth would insist on staying with her every minute until the wedding. And as much as Grace loved her, she needed time alone. “I’m just wondering how I’ll get all this done before tomorrow.” She tapped her list with an elegant nail.

“Let me see.” Liz studied the piece of paper. “I see a few things Chase and I can handle.” She sat. “Give me a piece of paper and a pen.”

Grace took a seat and gazed at her daughter. Liz chewed on her lower lip as she wrote, just as she had as a little girl. Memories warmed Grace's heart, and the corners of her mouth curled into a gentle smile. "Elizabeth."

Liz lifted her gaze to her mother. "What?"

"You're sure you're okay with me marrying Peter?" Grace searched her daughter's face for ... what? Assurance she'd made the right decision? She was the only one who could know that.

"Mom, after all you've gone through to make this happen, you better not be getting cold feet now." Liz cocked an eyebrow at her.

Grace shook her head. "I'm not. I ..."

"Look." Liz took her mom's hand. "I know you loved Dad more than anything, and the idea of you getting married to someone else took some getting used to, I admit. But Peter is a great guy, and I know you love each other." She smiled. "That's all that really counts."

"I do love him. In a different way from your dad." Grace remembered the first time she met Detective Peter Young. She'd slammed the door in his face, but he had remained gracious.

"Mom, you're grinning." Liz removed her hand. "I don't want to know what you're thinking."

"Elizabeth Ann." Grace drew herself upright. "I would never have such thoughts."

"Sure, Mom." Liz eyed her list again. "Does this help?" She showed it to her mother.

"More than I can tell you." Grace patted her arm. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"Chase and I are taking the boys into the town of Bridal Falls to the museum for a couple of hours. We can take care of these things then." Liz rose and walked to the sliding glass doors leading to the deck off the back. "You have a great view."

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" Grace joined her daughter.

The large doors opened onto the panorama of Bridal Falls valley. Patches of snow clung to the tops of tall pine trees dotting the steep sides that fell into shadows below. To the right, sunlight

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sparkled off Bridal Falls as it plunged down the slope to disappear among the trees.

Grace could hardly believe she was so blessed to have gotten this venue for her wedding. Especially this close to Christmas. She blinked. "I need to be at the Lodge for breakfast with Peter and our wedding planner. What time is it?"

"You're okay." Elizabeth hugged her and headed for the door.

"You are the best daughter in the world."

"I don't know about that, but maybe at Bridal Falls Lodge anyway." Liz chuckled. "See you at the wedding rehearsal."

The rehearsal. After forty-one years of being happily married and three years of being widowed, she'd found love again. She was getting married to another wonderful man.

"You've got that look again," Elizabeth said. "I'm out of here."

"Thanks again, sweetheart." Grace held her coat for her. "We'll talk later."

It was colder than Grace had expected. Outside, an approaching bank of gray clouds threatened on the horizon. "Lord, please let the bad weather hold off until after my wedding finishes and my guests can leave." It was a selfish prayer, but honest.

Grace drove up the hill, parked in front of the lodge, and went in. It never ceased to take her breath away. The view from her cabin was great, but the one out the bank of two-story windows in the lobby's gathering room was magnificent.

A couple braved the cold temperatures to sit on the patio outside the windows. "How can they stand it?" Grace muttered to herself.

"Stand what?"

An arm encircled her waist, and Detective Peter Young kissed her on the cheek.

"Being out on the patio." She inclined her head toward the couple before turning and sliding her arms around him. "I've missed you."

"It's only been a day." He chuckled low in his throat.

"It seems like a year." Grace cocked her head. "Or maybe I'm just hungry."

"I can help with that." He took her hand. "I know where the food is."

"You would." She and Peter strolled around a massive stone fireplace to double doors that led into the dining room. The restaurant jutted out from the building and had glass on three sides. "Will this be where we'll have our reception?" How beautiful it would be at night with light from the chandeliers reflecting off the windows and all the tables covered in white tablecloths.

"There's Laura." Peter lifted his chin in the direction of a woman waving at them from a table across the room. "She should know."

"In her signature red, I see." Did the woman own clothes in any other color? "Do you know the man with her?"

"No. Never met him." Peter dropped her hand to shake hands with the stranger.

"Grace. Peter." Laura Upton gave each of them a quick hug. "I took the liberty of inviting Alan Zeller, the lodge's events coordinator, to breakfast. I hope you don't mind."

"No, not at all." Peter pulled out a chair for Grace.

"Of course not." She smiled at the younger man. "I wasn't aware there was an events coordinator, or I would have gotten in touch with you myself."

"Not necessary." Alan waved a manicured hand in the air. "My job involves working directly with wedding planners."

From the severe look on his face, Grace was glad she didn't have to deal with him.

"Shall we order?" Laura smiled brightly. "Business can wait until we've had some of the lodge's delicious food."

Grace took a sip of coffee and tried to shake the feeling that she'd seen Alan Zeller somewhere before. Maybe he just looked like so many other young men these days with his dark hair shaved on the sides and left curly on top.

She furrowed her brow in concentration. No. That wasn't it.

Peter leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She raised her eyebrows at him.

"You look like you ate a lemon."

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“Sorry. I was thinking about ... my latest book.” She touched his cheek and smiled. “Is this better?”

“Yeah.”

Across the table, Alan mumbled something to Laura. Grace drew in a sharp breath. It wasn't him she recognized. It was his voice. Only the last time she'd heard it, he had been speaking to someone else.